Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission, by Michael Farquhar. Stanford University Press, 2017. 288pp. Hb. \$ 45.00. ISBN-13: 9780804798358.

Reviewed by Guido Steinberg. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, guido.steinberg@swp-berlin.org

In academic and public discourses, it has become commonplace to state that the rise of Salafism since the 1970s is at least partly the result of the export of Wahhabism to the wider world through the use of Saudi oil money, and through institutions like the Islamic University in Medina (*al-Jāmiʿa al-Islāmiyya bi-l-Madīna al-Munawwara*, IUM), which mainly caters to non-Saudi students and has become the missionary center of the Wahhabi movement since its inception in 1961. There are numerous examples of IUM-alumni playing varying roles in Salafist circles worldwide, from prominent mainstream Salafist preachers like the Jamaican Bilal Philips to several rather obscure militant thinkers who support or even join Salafi-jihadist groups.

Michael Farquhar offers a more nuanced view of the IUM than commonly discussed and highlights the ambivalence of the Saudi-Wahhabi missionary project and the limited influence of state actors—however resourceful they might be—and educational institutions in transnational religious culture. He shows that the Saudi state and its allies in the religious establishment have managed to spread Wahhabi doctrine by making use of the IUM, a policy which „contributed to the emergence and consolidation of Salafi currents in locations around the world” (p. 183). Nevertheless, he also argues that this policy, which was made possible by the use of the oil revenue of the Saudi state, has not always been able to secure allegiance to the Saudi state and its Wahhabi religious establishment. As a result, Farquhar prefers not to talk about the export of Wahhabism, but rather “Wahhabi religious expansion” (p. 183). As evidence, he quotes interviews with several unnamed alumni, but also lists the more prominent students who have played widely differing roles in the Salafist movement after their studies. Among them are Safar al-Ḥawālī (born 1950), who started a promising career as a prospective Wahhabi establishment scholar in the 1980s, but then became a figurehead of the oppositionist Islamic Awakening (*ṣaḥwa islāmiyya*) movement until he was jailed between 1993 and 1999 (p. 170). On the other side of the spectrum was Rābiʿ b. Ḥādī al-Madkhalī (born 1931), another Saudi who became the main reference of a movement that stresses the purification of the faith and the necessity to obey the political rulers, and thus has become prominent because of its strident attacks on politically active

---

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Islamic University in Medina, Wahhabism, Salafism, Islamism, transnationalism, Islamic education

Islamists and Salafists (pp. 106–107, 170). Other widely-known alumni cited by Farquhar are the Yemeni Salafists Muqbil b. Ḥādī al-Wādī'ī (1933–2001), whom he calls “the father figure of contemporary Salafism in Yemen,” the Egyptian ‘Abd al-Rahmān ‘Abd al-Khālīq, who became influential by promoting a politicized variant of Salafism from his new home base in Kuwait and several others.

Farquhar sees the reasons for this ambivalent outcome first, in the influences of non-Wahhabi Salafist and Islamist scholars and intellectuals like the Indians/Pakistanis Abu l-A'la Mawdūdī and Abū l-Ḥasan Nadwī, the Egyptians ‘Abd al-Razzāq ‘Afīfī and Ḥasanayn Muḥammad Makhluḥ, the Iraqis Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Sawwāf and Muḥammad Bahjat al-Atharī, all of whom played leading roles in the founding and early years of the IUM. In fact, the Wahhabi establishment, which was firmly in control of the institution, had to rely on these and many other educators from other Arab countries to teach at the newly founded IUM from 1961 onwards. Consequently, they influenced the curriculum especially in the areas that were not as central to Wahhabi teachings like monotheism (*tawḥīd*) and creed (*‘aqīda*). Furthermore, due to the transnational character of the project, students from all over the Muslim world brought their own cultural and religious predispositions with them and often maintained these throughout their studies and afterwards. Accordingly, the net result was often a hybrid worldview influenced by Wahhabi thinking to varying degrees, but hardly ever a total adoption of their worldview.

The book covers the history of the IUM until today. Chapter one (“Transformations in the late Ottoman Hijaz”) focuses on the changes in the educational system in the Hijaz since the late nineteenth century. In the second chapter entitled “Wahhabi expansion in Saudi-occupied Mecca,” Farquhar deals with the period after the Saudi-Wahhabi conquest of the Hijaz in 1924/1925, when the new rulers retained the more bureaucratized structures of the former Ottoman and Shari'ian educational systems, but also instituted Wahhabi control by the Najdi scholarly establishment and introduced Wahhabi teachings in core subjects. Due to the lack of qualified Najdi personnel and Hijazi resistance to the invaders' exclusivist teachings, the religious establishment had to accept the limits of their influence, but managed to recruit, in particular, Egyptians broadly sympathetic to the Wahhabi cause to teach in the Hijaz. Hence, the Wahhabis' first experiences in promoting their teachings were formed in cooperation with similar-minded individuals from foreign lands. Chapter three (“National Politics and Global Mission”) analyzes the political context of the foundation of the IUM, namely the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Nasser's Egypt, which contested the legitimacy of the Saudi dynasty and—as a means to instrumentalize religion in this struggle—had nationalized the Azhar university in June 1961. Farquhar corroborates common wisdom that the university was a product of a governmental decision, with the state and state-affiliated Wahhabi religious officials taking control.

In chapter four, “Migration and the forging of a scholarly community,” the author makes what might be considered his main argument, by describing the Wahhabi establishment as ill-equipped to provide the IUM with the necessary staff and attract non-Wahhabi students to study in Saudi Arabia. As a result, the state and the religious establishment decided to attract a wide-array of at least partly like-minded Islamists and Salafists from the Arab world to oversee the IUM in its Advisory Council and teach in its colleges. Most importantly, the IUM would recruit Egyptians, a strategy which was made easier by the availability of many Muslim Brothers who were persecuted in their home country in the 1950s and 1960s. This allowed the new institution to convey an image of considerable religious diversity which—together with material incentives—quickly gave Medina “an appearance of universality” (p. 108) and made it into an increasingly attractive destination for aspiring students of the religious sciences. In chapter 5 “Rethinking religious instruction,” Farquhar analyses the “strongly activist approach to religious schooling” (p. 113) aimed at building a generation of preachers (*duʿat*) whose task was to spread the true faith. Chapter six, “A Wahhabi corpus in motion,” gives deeper insight into the content of instruction, which was strongly influenced by Wahhabi teachings especially in *tawhīd* and *ʿaqīda*, but less so in legal sciences (*fiqh*), where the non-Wahhabis were able to introduce a more diverse curriculum attracting students of all the canonical schools of law (although the Wahhabis and the Saudi state traditionally tend to stick to Ḥanbalī norms). Chapter seven “Leaving Medina” focuses on the migrant students’ careers after their stay in Medina. Farquhar stresses that, in spite of all the Saudi efforts to control, the students enjoy considerable autonomy in choosing which parts of the IUM lore they bring with them to their home countries. This is evidenced by the wide array of religious-ideological paths taken by IUM alumni.

Farquhar provides the reader with a much-needed coherent overview of the history of the IUM, the first of its kind. He presents a sober view of the influence of the Saudi state and its religious establishment on the institution. The actual insights into the history of the institution and the persons shaping it remain limited, somewhat superficial, and therefore disappointing. The ways in which persons identified by Farquhar as highly influential in the university in the 1960s and 1970s like the former Grand Mufti Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (1893–1969) and his later successor (since 1993) ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Bāz actually shaped the institution remains in the shadows. Famous alumni of the IUM like Bilal Philips, Rabīʿ b. Hādī al-Madkhalī are all mentioned and treated in short paragraphs, but Farquhar rarely goes deeper into their religious and political convictions and how they might have been shaped by IUM. This might have been explained by a greater focus on the actual situation of the students and their lives based on interviews with IUM alumni. While Farquhar interviewed former students, no clear picture of life and study at this university

emerges. More interviews with a broader range of IUM alumni in more countries would have strengthened the analysis.

It would also have been helpful had the author actually used Reinhard Schulze's seminal book on the Muslim World League (*Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert*, Leiden 1990.), since Schulze's book would have provided the author with a highly sophisticated and exhaustive account of the alliance of Wahhabis, Salafists, and Islamists that also led to the emergence to the IUM.